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Christian Freedom

An Address Delivered in the Old South Church, Boston, Massachusetts, at the Morning Service, February 4, 1917, by the Rev. George A. Gordon, D.D.

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Christian Freedom

For freedom did Christ set us free: stand fast therefore, and be not entangled again in a yoke of bondage.
— GALATIANS v. 1.

FREEDOM and slavery are in uttermost contrast in the lives of human beings. The Greeks, whose tongue Paul wrote and spoke with power, divided their race into two classes: the class of the slave and the class of the freeman. Slavery they regarded as the lowest degradation; freedom as the highest exaltation alike of the outward life and the inward life. Such has been the feeling of all the greater peoples through the whole of human history. Slavery has meant physical, intellectual, and spiritual misery, an afflicted existence, an existence robbed of worth and joy; freedom has meant physical, intellectual, and spiritual worth, power, gladness, and hope. Here all Americans, of whatever origin, whether native or adopted, stand.

Americans were born into freedom; they inherited a world of freedom! Their country is the monumental symbol of freedom, first for

the white man, then for the black man and the red man, and finally for all men who come here and who are worthy to enter our fellowship and our service of freedom, who are ready to uphold the institutions and the ideals of the American Republic. The poet Burns, riding over the battlefield of Bannockburn, and composing the ode which Carlyle said should be sung with the throat of the whirlwind, sings not only for all the true sons of his native country, in all their generations, but also for all true Americans everywhere:

"*Wha will be a traitor knave?*
Wha can fill a coward's grave?
Wha sae base as be a slave? —
Let him turn, and flee!"

The sovereign gift of Jesus to the world was freedom,—freedom for the spirit that should eventually cover the earth with its own forms and institutions. And Paul, the greatest disciple of Jesus here, as elsewhere, seized his Master's religion at the heart, and in the text, translated accurately in Standard Bible, set before the world this double gift of Christian freedom: "For freedom did Christ set us free." Here are the two great aspects of freedom: the interior freedom of the spirit and the gradual, progressive freedom both in religion and in political life. These are the two aspects of Christian freedom that I am to discuss with you this morning.

I. Freedom of the Mind

CHRISTIAN freedom begins in the mind; it is interior, it is spiritual. It is freedom from the domination of wrong ideas, false notions, base superstitions, evil purposes, brutal passions; it is emancipation from a world in the mind that is false, wrong, wretched. According to Christianity there can be no freedom that does not begin in the mind; and this interior freedom takes two great directions: it concerns the being and the character of God, his disposition toward mankind, his government of the world. Think of the notions, false, base, horrible, that have for ages darkened the face of the Most High and made men cringe in his presence and try to bribe him into doing right, to propitiate him into good-will toward his own children! Christianity is, first of all, an emancipation from this vast and wretched world of false and degrading notions that have blotted out the benignity of the Supreme Being from the sphere of human vision.

This emancipation concerns not God only but also man. An equal number of false, mistaken, debasing notions have grown up in regard to human life; this tyranny of false and debasing ideas and views holds men in wrong-doing, drives them into courses of shame, and will not let them escape. Christianity makes men free in their ideas about themselves, their kind, their constitution, the good for which they

were made, and enables them to see what is essential good. Inward freedom,—that is the first word in Christianity, freedom of the mind. Jesus spoke no greater words in all his ministry than these: "Ye shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free." True ideas on any subject, sincerely entertained, make a true mind; a true and a truth-loving mind is the free mind, and it alone is free.

Jesus was persecuted by the State and finally he was put to death by the State; but he founded a kingdom of truth in freedom and a kingdom of freedom in truth. He had perfect confidence in the truth in the hands of freedom, and of freedom as the child of truth. As I have said, his greatest apostle, free-born, a citizen of the Roman Empire as he was, perhaps because he was free-born, seized upon the great central gift and promise of his Master to mankind of immediate interior freedom and of ultimate external freedom. That double freedom was Paul's gospel to the Empire. There is an epic in the life of this monumental man who had so long and in vain sought freedom from a world of evil superstitions and false notions about God and about himself. The great emancipation came to him when he became a disciple of Jesus; then he stepped forth as a man made free within and made for freedom in a free world.

In this apostolic succession we must place the Phrygian slave, Epictetus, who loved freedom with a mighty love and who asked this

great question: "Who made you a slave, Nero or thyself?" Freedom began with him in the mind, in the soul, and this is the story behind the achievement of real freedom everywhere.

The Pilgrims, our prophets of freedom, began here. Freedom was first of all a mental passion with them, cherished in old England, cherished in Holland, cherished in the wilderness of New England; more and more they sought to be free within. We think of the mistakes, the blunders, the inconsistencies of the Pilgrims and the Puritans; we dwell on these altogether unmagnanimously and too much. Here is their central bequest which made them great and which makes them greater as the generations run. They began with freedom in their souls; that was their passion; more and more it came to them; more and more it is coming to the world, and the Pilgrims especially are among the prophets of this greatest thing in human history, — the free mind in the truth, the mind made free by the truth.

II. Outward Freedom

TURN now to the other aspect of Christian freedom. While Christian freedom begins in the mind it does not end there. It is bound to flow outward in its true ideas, and more and more it seeks forms and institutions accordant with its own character. In the life of each tree there resides a plan, and that plan

conforms to itself the tree in which the life is to dwell; oak, ash, pine, maple, elm, each becomes the form, lifted into existence, grown into existence by the impulse of the interior building life. In the same way the free mind seeks to utter itself in forms and in institutions accordant with its own character. Here we touch the deepest struggle in all human history, — the conflict between the true mind, the mind made true by true ideas, seeking to express itself in institutions correspondent with itself, and the darkened mind, the mind in bondage, calling upon compulsion and force to maintain it in the world. There is the central conflict in the history of the world: the mind made free by true ideas, seeking to express itself in institutions and forms accordant with its own character, and the mind under the domination of false ideas, in part or in whole, employing force to maintain itself supreme against freedom and against truth; there, I repeat, is the central conflict and the glory of human history.

More and more for the last one hundred and fifty years Providence has been throwing into the hands of the people, among growing democracies, the cause of freedom and the cause of truth against autocracy, against absolutism, against those whose false notions of their majesty are supported by compulsion. The first great movement was the American Revolution. This was seconded by the lurid splendor and

magnificence of the French Revolution; there modern democracy was born; there the people began to live in true ideas and in freedom; there and then they began to build the free commonwealth.

I beg you to note this great development of democracy employed, as it would seem, and as I believe, by Providence to create freedom under true ideas and with freedom to create institutions for the benefit — not of certain classes but of all mankind. Modern France is a democracy; modern Britain is a democracy; the United States of America is a democracy! We speak of the blunders of democracies, and it is well that we do; we call attention to their mistakes, follies, extravagancies, and that is well. But fasten your eye upon the central thing, — men under the domination, on the whole, of true conceptions and thereby made freemen; men seeking to express this truth and this freedom in institutions created for the good of the whole body politic.

1. Religious Freedom. Here the State touches two great interests of the individual man, his religious life and his political life. We in America declare the State shall not say what we shall believe or what we shall worship, or how we shall worship what we deem all-worthy. The State must leave us to decide what we regard as true, what we regard as worthy of worship; it must leave us free to adopt what we regard as the best method of worship. And here again

we are close to the Pilgrims as prophets of freedom; this is our inheritance from them, this distinction between State and Church. The authority of the State stops at the door of the sanctuary, and a man's creed is of his own thinking; a man's worship is to the being in whom he believes, and the mode of his worship is according to his convenience and preference.

No man can estimate what this inheritance is yet to do for the world. We are only beginning to see what religious freedom means. When men are free to believe in what they regard as the truth, free to worship what they hold to be the Eternal Excellence, free in all their methods of worship, that will mean a new world of sincerity, of insight, of character, of power in religion.

2. *Political Freedom.* The second point at which the State touches freedom concerns the individual citizen. This country was founded to give reasonable and just opportunity to individual citizens, for the expression of whatever gifts the Almighty had implanted in them, — industrial, intellectual, and spiritual. The American State is the guardian, the authoritative guardian of the utmost ordered opportunity for all men, that they may work out the gifts that are in them. The American State is not a nurse, it is not a hospital, it is not a syndicate of capitalists, it is not a union of laborers, it is not a paternalism of any kind; it is a majestic umpire in the free development of

all American talent; it is the great guarantor of fair play for all individuals; and, in the third place, it is the benevolent friend of the defeated and the unfortunate.

This is the American conception of the State, the conception of the founders, and of the second founders; of those who fought that this Republic might come into being and of those who fought that it might continue in being. I repeat that the American State is not a nurse, it is not a hospital, it is not a syndicate of money-changers, it is not a union of laborers, it is not a paternalism of any kind: it is an umpire in the free development of manifold power, it is a guarantor of fair play in the realization of the universal opportunity!

This system is not without defects. It has this immortal merit, however; it has bred a race fit to found, fit to maintain, fit to defend, fit to perpetuate the institutions of free men! To-day is a solemn day in the life of this nation. We are on the verge of War, and our population is made up largely of the kindred of those who are fighting one another in the continent of Europe: Scot, English, Irish, Italian, French, Belgian on the one side; and of the nations fighting on the other side, all but one are generously represented in the American Republic. I would be the last to speak a bitter word or a word to hurt the sensibilities of any man whose blood is derived from either of the Central Powers. But we have on our hands a

problem, and our question is, how shall we face it as a united America? The answer is, we must face it as our forefathers faced the Revolution.

3. The Lesson of the Founders. Here is the great, impressive lesson for the composite America of to-day. Whom did the Colonists fight? Their kindred, their fathers, their brothers, those who were bone of their bone and flesh of their flesh. It was Englishman against Englishman, Scot against Scot, and Irishman against Irishman. It was a war between kindred and between kinsmen who twenty years before had been profound and happy friends! Kinsmen, with the same language, with the same religion, with the same literature, with the same traditions of freedom and power and manhood, went forth to meet each other in battle. There is nothing like so tragic a situation in the America of to-day as we confront the possibilities of the future as there was when the Tea Party took place at the hands of those who gathered in the Old South Meetinghouse; or when Washington took command of the Continental Army under the old tree in Cambridge. What was their argument, conclusion, motive? It was that every tie must be like tow in the fire when it comes to the question of the existence of freedom among men born for freedom!

I commend this example to my fellow adopted citizens of other blood than my own, and I know if the case were reversed I should take the lesson

to myself. What did I mean when I took the oath of allegiance to the Constitution of the United States and foreswore specially and specifically all allegiance to the Queen of Great Britain? Preparation for any emergency and readiness to count freedom, American freedom, first, last, and all the time above every other interest.

One lesson more from the Revolution. The revolutionists made a distinction clear and deep between the government of Great Britain and the people, between King George III and his lackeys and blind servants and tyrants, and the whole people. They knew that Chatham was with them, that the greatest political genius of the English race was with them, — Edmund Burke; they knew or might have known that the poet Burns was with them, who after the war wrote a great "Ode to Washington," who after the War sacrificed all possibility of a pension from the Government by writing "A Dream" to George III, which I beg you to read. Let our Teutonic citizens, who are among the most substantial and the ablest and the worthiest of the adopted sons of America, — let them draw the distinction which *your* fathers drew in the day of their distress; let them draw the distinction between the Teutonic peoples and the Teutonic government. And remember that if he were free to speak, the *true* Teuton would say that no nation has a right to limit the just freedom of the United States; subject it to

indignity; to murder its women and children on the high seas, or to confine its industry and influence within its own bounds.

We are one to-day, one in our belief in free institutions, one in our sense of obligation to the American Republic, and all ties even of the most sacred character must be, as I have said, like tow in the fire when it comes to the question whether America shall be first or the country of our descent or our birth.

The President of the United States has been patient, patient to the utmost limit, so patient that the world has been in danger of misunderstanding him. Let us thank God to-day for his patience, for his clearness, for his solemn decision, and for his hope that war may yet be averted. Let us be ready, with our faith, our prayer, our manhood, and all our resources to stand behind the Government that guards the heritage of the American people.

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